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# THE PRESENT LITERARY SITUATION IN FRANCE.

BY HENRY JAMES.

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THERE are as many reasons just now, I dare say, as can well be pointed out for a certain sense of difficulty on the part of those who, caring for the things of the mind, desire, as the century draws to its end, to accompany its last steps with some acknowledgment of a great particular debt. We have all owed so much to the France of the past fifty years, that we should fail of common good manners were we to neglect the right moment—as this might naturally be deemed—for putting our gratitude on record. The difficulty I just spoke of is, however, that the right moment happens, by a shocking perversity and just in time to disconcert us, to have assumed every appearance—every superficial one, at least—of being the wrong. There has, unfortunately, for all the fifty years, been no crisis in France at which the things of the mind were so little the fashion. Practically suppressed and smothered, stricken and silent behind the bars of their hideous political cage, we must think of them as, at the worst, only living by the light of faith and biding their time. What is, at any rate, most clear to us is that to doubt of any but a happy issue for them would be a particularly cheap disloyalty. They are there, and they will again show it. They were still there till the other day, and any appearance of virtual extinction is, therefore, promptly to be challenged. The bad dream must pass, and the prospect of relief and of a good day's work must come with the morning.

Our concern, moreover—to speak of ourselves—is, at this date, mainly for those who shall follow us. The question for us, in the presence of the actual, sharp eclipse, is of the prospect of profit for the new generation; of whether it may count, at the best, on forming ties and receiving benefits that shall have been at all

a match for our own. We have been, we others, a fortunate company, and it is only of late that our fortune has sensibly shrunk. When I think of the "good time" we have had, the readers who began in the fifties and sixties to be aware of their luck, I have to acknowledge with a sigh that the longest feast comes, in the nature of things, to an end. "It is not to be expected," we are prepared blandly to say to our children, "that you should be as happy as we." Yet it comes back, after all, to what may really be left for them.

There is no convenient measure of this that does not involve some measure, first, of what has been taken; and yet I am afraid of going but too far if I begin to analyze the sense of loss that abides with the elder contemporary. I must remember, too, that he pleads in such a case for his own house, and that his own house—poor wretch that he is—is essentially his own youth and the irrecoverable freshness of its first curiosities and its first responses. Lucky for him, indeed, if letters were his bent, that he could cultivate them in the near presence of the greater figures—of Victor Hugo and Sainte-Beuve, of Balzac and George Sand, of Taine and Renan and Flaubert. The generosity of youth, all the same, I bear in mind, makes its own heyday; and I am not without envy of those who, at present, are able to add that agreeable sauce to their relish of—for instance—M. Anatole France. On the other hand, of course, it is quite open to the new generation to spend their time, to their hearts' content, with Victor Hugo and Balzac, with Sainte-Beuve and Madame Sand. The truth, however, remains that preference, at any period, settles, gracefully enough, on those flowers of production that the period itself wears in its breast. The other flowers, faded petals and withered herbage, come too much within the definition of the "pressed." They lurk between the leaves of the books that have ceased to lie on the table, the books that lurk, themselves, behind cold glass. It is with those on the table that we are now concerned; and, to be definite about the moment at which they may be taken as exchanging the table for the honor of the upper shelves, I shall assume this occasion to be that of the author's death.

The great historians are dead, then—the last of them went with Renan; the great critics are dead—the last of them went with Taine; the great dramatists are dead—the last of them went with

Dumas; and, of the novelists of the striking group originally fathered by the Second Empire, Émile Zola is the only one still happily erect. The present men, in different quarters, are the younger—so much the younger that Zola, among them, rises almost like a patriarch. This is the case even with the critics—the race which, as a general thing, is least accountable for itself when positively young. It much enriches the experience of a reader who has come to fifty years, that he can really recall the time when Jules Lemaître was not. It even, perhaps, in truth, contributes to that wisdom that he has lived to be conscious of a period once more practically deprived of this possession. M. Lemaître is still on the table, but I think it not injudicious to say that his happiest star has, within less than twenty years, set as well as risen. None the less, with whatever losses, it is not yet on the critical side that the French intelligence may be noted as faltering to any such degree as shall minister to the comparative complacency of observers—and, least of all, of competitors—of our own race. The spirit of conversation is so indefeasible a part of the genius of the people that, however among them the creative gift may flicker, the last light markedly to pale must ever necessarily be the form that has most in common with suggested talk. If the races personally inexpressive, monosyllabic at best, may be—as regards letters and art—handicapped by that fact for criticism, so it is beyond contradiction, I think, that the French, on the opposite basis, have so much the start of us that the spirit of the matter begins for them quite where we are condemned to see it—and in no little exhaustion—give way. There are always criticism and *causerie*, in short, in France, even if there be not always Sainte-Beuve; and this can never, it is well to remember, be so much an advantage to a nation as on the occasion of its having to recognize other conditions of weakness. Marked as such conditions may, on other lines, have become, it is still the French genius that would have the most and the best to say about them. Twenty volumes of free discussion of such and other kinds of possibility appear in Paris for one that is published in London or in New York. This is a circumstance not to be lost sight of in any estimate, on our own part, of the rise or the fall: it may turn so in favor of the presumption that our standpoint for appreciation needs a little further building up. I confess that I am conscious of how much, among us all, it requires an indifference to

lurking irony to say that M. Jules Lemaître is not so good as—well, as he used to be.

He is not so good just now, at all events, as M. Émile Faguet; nor as the authors of several of the happiest little volumes—at once so much and so little on the pattern of the series of the “English Men of Letters”—in Hachette’s undertaking of “*Les Grands Écrivains Français*.” The latter publication has had its ups and downs, but nothing is more suggestive, in many ways, than to compare the spirit and the form of it with those of its predecessor. The authors of the English studies appear to labor, in general, under a terror of critical responsibility; the authors of the French, on the contrary, to hunger and thirst for it. The authors of the English, shirking and dodging, at every turn, any relation of their subject that may compel them to broach an idea, hug the safe and easy shore of small biographical fact and anecdote; the authors of the French are impatient till they can put out into the open and sound its depths and breathe its air. That he was so far from being afraid of ideas as to find, on the contrary, something like intoxication in them, was the more particular secret of that early freshness of M. Jules Lemaître which makes us recall with delight the first years of his activity. It was, perhaps, his defect that one could serve for his amusement almost as well as another; this led him, in time, to play with them too much the game of cup-and-ball—there was none too light or too heavy for him to toss in the air, with an art all his own, and catch again. He had acquired his perfection at this exercise in the great and beautiful school—had, with a diligence only to be matched in Anatole France, studied under Ernest Renan that art of imperturbable charmed inquiry, vertiginous speculation and inconclusive thought of which this beautiful genius was so happy a master. Whereas, however, the positive high beauty of Renan’s temper was ever in itself a kind of conclusion, it was the fate of this most promising of his pupils to give us, finally, the impression of a critic trying rather vainly not only to make up a mind, but to make up a character. Had I space in these too few pages to do more, on any side, than glance, it would be extremely interesting—it would, I think, sharply point a moral—to follow the successive steps by which the author of “*Les Contemporains*” was to become, little by little, and comparatively speaking, a sort of reduced, disembodied agility, playing his trick in a close room and

a stale air. The strange thing was that, when he at last elected, as we say, to represent a conviction, he should have fixed upon one of the ugliest. His voice was loud, throughout the "Affair"—by no means concluded as I write—in the anti-revisionist and anti-Semitic interest. And I remember, with due deference to the mystery of things, that there was a year or two in the time of their working, as it were, side by side when I wondered if Anatole France were not, of the two, the less to be desired.

Things have changed since then, and the author of "*La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pedauque*," the creator of Monsieur Bergeret and of Sylvestre Bonnard, has shown a complexity of talent in the presence of which the interest that he inspires deepens more and more—I speak at least for myself—to a sense of fascination. M. Lemaître, on the other hand, has pushed his fortune, both in the critical and in the more directly productive way, more and more in the quarter of the theatre—a phenomenon which would, precisely, receive its due attention in any study of what I cannot help thinking his rather dark deviation. Of the more distinctly critical industry of his happier rival, I may take no space to speak, the later development of M. France placing him in a new and special category. And then there remain M. Brunetière, the editor of the "*Revue des Deux Mondes*," who has lectured, with authority, in the United States, and M. Émile Faguet and M. Paul Bourget, each in his degree a striking representative of certain sides of the French critical spirit. M. Bourget, indeed, like M. France, has found his most effective vocation as a novelist—though his productions in this character bristle, not less than those of M. France, and much, I hasten to add, to their enrichment, with that superior presence of the insistent question which the fiction of our day has so happily learned to treat as an aid to the rendering of appearances. Of all novelists, M. Bourget has most the mark of having learnt his trade in a school—the school of reflection—not hitherto supposed to be that of the novel; which is exactly, moreover, one of the things that make him most interesting. His subject is always an idea, and he is capable of regarding an idea as a positive source of "excitement."

I have the less regret at being able, in this small summary, only to testify to the large space occupied, in the public eye, by M. Brunetière, as, critically speaking, he has been, to my judgment, the least genial, in the German sense, of all such recent

appearances. M. Brunetière is two distinct things which are much better kept so than united: an extremely erudite mind and an extremely irritated temper. He is full of information and chagrin, and it is one way to describe him—since I may deal but in the shortest cuts—to say that his intelligence has not kept pace with his learning. It has gone into that large and lighted, but unduly heated, chamber and closed the door behind it; and there, perched at the narrowest of windows, it has looked through a glass darkly—with fatal frustration. He produces the impression of second-rate opinion, of perception arrested and confused. It does him no injustice to say that he represents that least luminous of all things, official criticism. The only office of the critical understanding that does not stultify it is to *give* itself, to the last drop of its blood. If M. Brunetière has made this surrender, it can only be said that he had not originally much to give. Of the most interesting things that have happened round about him, he strikes me as having been the interpreter the most hampered; and it is scarcely too much to say that his country and his age have, to a certain extent, been wasted on him. There are other periods, certainly other climes, that, frankly, would have served him quite as well.

With M. Émile Faguet, since I must also be brief, I prefer to speak under impressions most recently received, and in particular under that of the extraordinarily able little study of Gustave Flaubert just contributed to the "*Grands Écrivains*." Remarkably full and remarkably intelligent, M. Faguet had previously struck me as—I confess it with compunction—perceptibly common. The case, indeed, was almost ambiguous—how *could* a writer be common who not only always knew, but always felt, his affair so well? M. Faguet's affair was invariably excellent. But I remember the ambiguity dropped when, one day last spring, in the reading-room of a foreign hotel, I came across the newspaper in which, on the occasion of the death of Francisque Sarcey, our critic, in an admirable piece of fore-shortening, commemorated that colleague. The portrait, in a few strokes, yet of a handling the largest and fairest, was a little miracle of understanding and expression. Decidedly, M. Faguet was *not*, in this case, common; and that imputation appears to me, on the whole, to apply equally little to his exhaustive—his almost too exhaustive—analysis of the author of "*Madame Bovary*." I am reduced, however, I admit,

in respect to this performance, almost to a single state of mind—that of absolutely grateful appreciation of the particular long chapter devoted to Flaubert's masterpiece. It is not that this chapter contains no utterance whatever with which I find myself at odds: if one had space one might, surely, on the contrary, contest with some spirit the supreme place it assigns to "*Madame Bovary*" as an exhibition of the perverse female creature. Nothing will ever prevent Flaubert's heroine from having been an extremely minor specimen, even of the possibilities of her own type, a two-penny lady, in truth, of an experience so limited that some of her chords, it is clear, can never have sounded at all. It is a mistake, in other words, to speak of any feminine nature as consummately exhibited, that is exhibited in so small a number of its possible relations. Give it three or four others, we feel moved to say—"then we can talk." But this, I hasten to add, is beside the matter in my mind, which is that of the happy lift assuredly given to any worker in Flaubert's field who may read M. Faguet's chapter. What can it be else than a joy to an artist to encounter so concrete an example of the undertaking, in the presence of a work of art, to *consider*? The pages I speak of are a masterpiece of consideration. Let them remain as a proof of what, to the critic, is possible in that line. There is no excuse after them for any question of the matter.

To have just encountered, in connection with this name, I may further observe, the much more diffused one of the late M. Sarcy, is to feel afresh with what eagerness I profit by my exemption from speaking of the dead. This most sedentary of spectators—his eminent office, as all know, was that of theatrical reporter for upwards of thirty years to "*Le Temps*"—was incontestably, during much of his career, one of the "forces" of literary criticism in France; but he would take us much further than it would be worth our while to go. He was, in his way, a massive and genial figure, but he was, on the whole, little of a light. One may desire all honor to his shade and still be conscious that one has even yet not forgotten, among many things indeed, certain recent cases in which his vulgarity of judgment was a strange—was, in fact, a ridiculous—false note in the "authority" he had so patiently built up. I recall, from a few months ago, a presentation of "*Othello*" at the Théâtre Français, which, both as to the version adopted and the rendering offered, was a sufficient



challenge to wonder; but this performance was the flower of distinction compared with M. Sarcey's remarks on it. It went hard with him, at any time, to admit that any play of Shakespeare was "*une pièce*," and, indeed, for his doom of having had, on occasion, to examine several of them in the light of this question, I hold that he was much to be pitied. If I write the name of M. de Voguë in the same neighborhood, it is only that M. de Voguë too is critically eminent, and that I am yet obliged to pass him by. Consummately clever, yet without having created a manner, he is, perhaps, as but one of a number, the best instance of how the most characteristic French aptitude may assert itself even in dull days. The man of genius is always a wonder, but the man of M. de Voguë's particular combination of resources may, perhaps, still more, on occasion, cause the observer to lose himself in meditation. He shows at times as what the observer would, perhaps, himself fain have been. He is, at all events, in especial, the man of the world of his *partie*; he knows many things and has a clear and frequent eloquence and a wonderful easy hand. The hand, assuredly, in France, never fails, and may be seen at the century's end nervously reaching out from the abyss of an intellectual experience, that almost seems at moments to threaten to operate as a shaft sunk too straight. A great curiosity still survives this experience. French critical literature is even now a monument of it, and if the time ever was when the preponderance of inquiry was on our side of the Atlantic and of the Channel, contemporary periodical literature in the opposite quarter has quite reversed the relation. We at present, Americans and English together, push our intellectual feelers with a vivacity by no means proportionate to our own exposure. We seem unlikely to create any successful diversion to our being ourselves understood.

It is distinctly when we come to the novelists—for I must make a long stride over historians, philosophers and poets, sustained by the reflection that the best novelists are all three—that we remain rather persistently more aware of what is gone than of what is left. There is in this quarter, evidently, a distinct chill in the air; there are empty places, gaps into space, the look of a field less occupied. Daudet, so individual and beautiful, died but yesterday; Maupassant, as strong—productively speaking—as a young horse, and with a voice all his own, passed away the day before. Émile Zola, of the elder men, alone remains; with Paul

Bourget and Pierre Loti and M. Huysmans—with Anatole France, perhaps, too—among the younger; and with MM. Paul Hervieu and Marcel Prévost among the youngest of all. Merely to enumerate these names, however, is to become freshly aware of my inability to take them in turn: the most that, in these conditions, they may help the critic to is some new demonstration, much abbreviated, of the intensity with which, in France, this wondrous form has been worked. At whatever result the serious inquirer might arrive, he would recognize no want of the real energy, the proper passion, in the working of their material by this interesting group. Of the material itself, there would easily be much to say—I cannot help thinking that there *is* much; but there is little that is not obvious to be said of the intelligence and the courage. These remain so great—are capable of giving out, on occasion, such vivid lights and of throwing up such renewals—as to bring back a possibility by no means unfamiliar, I dare say, to any ingenious mind attentive to these things: the apprehension that there may, after all, be some strange and fatal disparity between French talent and French life. That puts the case, no doubt, with a certain breadth; but it may, none the less, represent one of the occasional wonderments of a spectator from a distance. Does French life *support* being worked with the fury—as we may almost say—that the great combination, from Balzac down, have brought to bear on it? Would our bigger Anglo-Saxon life, even? Would any collective life that is now being led on the globe? The Anglo-Saxon world, with the multitude of its practical experiments and the variety of its material habitats, would, perhaps, hold out longest; and I express a fancy that I have sometimes idly entertained when I say, that we alone would have offered a broad enough back to such acute penetration and such consistent irony. The spirit of the French novel at its best, in other words, would have been worthy to plunge into us, and we should have been, as a rich world-people, worthy to be stretched on the table. We should not certainly have been Paris at all—in which there would have been a loss; but we should, on the other hand, not have been Paris only and ever—in which there would have been a gain.

The danger I glance at *is*, in a word, the danger arising from sameness of subject. There tends too much to be only one—the subject, so familiar to us all that this light emphasis suffices to

identify it. The complications, the perils, that wait on concealed attachments play, it may perfectly be argued, an immense part in life, and a face of proportionate surprise may be offered to any plea that so general and indispensable an element of truth and interest is lightly to be dispensed with. This is a position with which, of course, all suggestion has to reckon; and I may as well say at once that I have no direct remedy to produce. The candid critic is, I even hold, excusable for not being wholly sure that, taking into account the general play of the French imagination, the remedy is quite within reach. It might, none the less, be tried. If I said just now that Flaubert's *Emma Bovary* is at best the demonstration of a poor case, and that the case would have been bettered if more relations had been shown, so this may, perhaps, serve as a hint of the quarter in which general help lies. Might not, in general, the painter of French life do something towards conjuring away that demon of staleness who hovers very dreadfully, at this time of day, everywhere, I acknowledge, on the horizon of us belated workers, by cultivating just this possibility of the vision of more relations? There *are* others, after all, than those of the eternal triangle of the husband, the wife and the lover, or of that variation of this to which we are too much condemned as an only alternative—the mistress, the first and the second, or the second and the third, the third and the fourth, lovers. What we continue to have, for the most part, is the paraphernalia of concealment—the drama of alarm and exposure; on which, with prodigious ingenuity, all the changes have been rung. Our real satiety lies, however, I think, not even in our familiarity with this range of representation; it lies, at bottom, in our unassuaged thirst for some more constant and more various portrayal of character. It may fairly be said that the French *parti-pris* not only turns too persistent a back on those quarters of life in which character does play, but also—and with still less justice—tends to pervert and minimize the idea of “passion.” Passion still abides with us, though its wings have undoubtedly been clipped; the possibility of it is, in the vulgar phrase, all over the place. But it lives a great variety of life, burns with other flames and throbs with other obsessions than the sole sexual. In some of these connections it *absolutely becomes* character; whereas character, on the contrary, encounters in the sexual the particular air, the special erotic fog, that most muffles and dampens it. Closely observed, indeed, the

erotic drama gives us, for all the prodigious bustle involved, almost never a striking illustration of it. "Passion" crowds it out; but passion is strangely brief, while character, like art itself, as we know, is long. The great Balzac, clearly, had made this reflection when, beating the bush with a cudgel all his own, he started up game of so many different kinds. I know not really if there be a better possible admonition to his successors than to go back to him. It would probably ensue from their doing so, that what I have called their sameness of subject would find itself by the very fact eased off, relieved of the undue strain upon it and enabled to recover some of its lost elasticity.

The reporter free to proceed to particulars would, at any rate, to-day find the superficial space occupied by M. Émile Zola not sensibly shrunken during these dozen years. His competitors have in most cases, come and gone, but M. Zola has solidly stayed. Perhaps this it is that most makes him difficult to dispose of briefly; he is, at one and the same time, so little a genius of the highest distinction and so little a negligible quantity. He would still be magnificent if he had nothing for him but his solidity—in the contemplation of which I should almost luxuriously lose myself were it permitted to me to treat in summary fashion even one side of his work. He is a large enough figure to make us lose time in walking round him for the most convenient view. The question of choice, however, let me hasten to add, finds itself, if the critic happen to be also a member, however subordinate, of the author's own guild, materially simplified—so much more does M. Zola, when it comes to the entertainment a brother-novelist may seek from him, speak of one particular matter than of all the others together. He speaks of the great, plain, measurable matter of method, and his own is the thing that has ended by making him most interesting. So, at least, must one put it for one's self, taking courage to do this even in face of the multitudinous results of an energy extraordinarily "creative." What he has most vividly created, to my sense, is the process that has seen him through. None of M. Zola's heroes stand so squarely on their feet as M. Zola's heroic system; the evolution of none of his heroines has been so unbrokenly patient. There the system is to-day, supremely representing on his behalf the communication of life. We have seen it at work, time after time—seen it more and more a calculated means to an end; and have, surely—if it has engaged

our curiosity at all—lived with it during these years very greatly to our entertainment, if not to our highest edification. I may not here undertake the business of describing it, and I mention it, indeed, mainly to pay it publicly my respects. For it has been in its way an intellectual lesson. Quite apart from what may be urged to its advantage or its detriment, it has shown, at least, admirably what a method can do. To arrive—as he has arrived—at the goal he began with fixing, M. Zola had to make out his special economy—see it steadily and see it whole. He has seen, moreover, many things besides; not the individual soul, the individual life, perhaps, with any great intimacy—never, indeed, with an inspired penetration; but always, vividly, its happy mean, or general average, of sense; its associated, confounded, scarce discriminated state. He has given us in this way—and the phenomenon is curious enough—an immense deal of life, a big chronicle of tragedy and comedy, action and passion, while giving us, nevertheless, comparatively little consciousness. Once or twice—as in the case of “Rome”—he has, in the absence of subjective saturation, been reduced to method alone; and remarkable enough, no doubt, is the spectacle of what, out of habit and gratitude, method alone has there done to him. This case was curious enough for those who knew. But the horse is not, I take it, to be trusted to repeat the jump.

It is not, certainly, true of M. Paul Bourget that his manner is a compromise founded on any generalization of the consciousness. It involves, on the contrary, a specification, for the individual represented, that is intense and exhaustive. M. Bourget literally *inhabits* the consciousness, as writers of the temperament of M. Zola inhabit the outer world. His relation to it is not that of a visitor for a purpose or of a collector with a note-book; it is that of a resident, of habits so confirmed that he on no pretext whatever can bring himself to stir from home. His travels far and wide are accomplished in that wonderful continuous gallery. It forms for him, as a spectator of life, a large glass cage equipped with wheels, stoves and other conveniences, in which he moves over his field very much as a great American railway-director moves over his favorite line in his “luxuriously-appointed” private car. For the consciousness inhabited by M. Bourget *is* luxuriously appointed. I only regret that it is impossible we should here accompany him on one or two of his journeys. We must use at

this moment shorter cuts. I so feel that it fairly makes mincemeat of M. Anatole France to throw off a rough estimate of "*L'Orme du Mail*" and "*Le Mannequin d'Osier*," that I prefer to escape altogether from the question of shades by saying that he is a writer who freshly stirs up one's gratitude to his country, and one's frank recognition of the rich conditions that could produce him. We take him, as we have, first and last, gladly taken Pierre Loti, for a regular happy case. He is, in fine, at this moment, the great luxury of the time; he helps us to resign ourselves to an age that at last cynically confesses itself—in a million volumes—"un-literary." M. Anatole France and his fortune are really the facts that, at the actual hour, most save it. To his own country, in especial, at a juncture when she has need, he renders extraordinary redemptive service; he persists in being what he is—and sells. It makes up for many things that there is still a liberal ear in France for such native notes, still a diffused taste for a mixture so artful. The author of "*L'Anneau d'Améthyste*," therefore, does the best thing a good patriot can do—he makes others like to think, in spite of his own strictures upon it, of his public. Who makes anyone like to think of ours?

HENRY JAMES.